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ABSTRACT

Early childhood majors have little opportunity to work with adults but are expected to forge relationships with families once they begin work in the field. This study examined the experiences of six community college early childhood majors and one teacher educator in using children's literature to learn about working with young children's families. On a weekly basis, the students introduced children's books to between one and five fellow community college students who had been learning English as their second language. In these meetings, the group discussed the experience of reading aloud to their children the book they borrowed the week before, and the early childhood major introduced a new book and reading strategy. Group members then formed pairs and practiced reading aloud. The early childhood students also met weekly with their instructor to reflect upon their experiences, to write about their experiences, and to complete interviews. Analysis of interviews and extensive field notes suggested that most of the early childhood students began the project with preconceptions of adult second language learners that worried them but ended the project with changed attitudes. Early childhood students sought families' strengths, supported situations that enhanced parent-child relationships, and listened nonjudgmentally as family members discussed those relationships. Students were further able to explore some of the elements that contribute to positive relationships with families. Some students expressed fears about working with adults in groups and about the expectations that others might have of them. The use of the children's books raised issues that enabled the early childhood majors and their group members to explore similarities across cultures and individual differences among students. (Contains 20 references.) (KB)

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# ....More of a Puzzle Piece: Early Childhood Students, Literacy and Families from Diverse Backgrounds

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Paper presented at 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 28, 2000

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This paper examines the experience a diverse group of six community college early childhood majors and one teacher educator had using children's literature to learn about working with young children's families. The purpose of this article is to probe what the early childhood majors and I learned from this project and what that can suggest for other teacher educators and students. The article investigates how the early childhood majors who participated in this project:

* were involved in literacy activities with other adults and
* learned about families' strengths through the relationships they developed as they participated in these activities.

Every week during the Fall semester of 1993, six early childhood majors introduced children's books to other students at their community college. The latter students were learning English as their second language as part of their college studies. Once a week, in addition to their classes, they attended a group session led by one of the six early childhood majors. There between one and five second language speakers and one early childhood major read, discussed, and borrowed children's books that they read aloud to children during the intervening days. The student groups read and discussed a different children's book each week and practiced specific reading strategies linked to each genre of children's book.

The early childhood majors also met with me weekly from September through December 1993 to prepare for the groups they conducted. In our meetings they reflected in writing and in our collaborative talk. With assistance from one of the students, I analyzed the early childhood majors' writing, interviews they conducted with each other at the end of the semester, logs the second language speakers kept about reading aloud, and fieldnotes I kept to record our preparatory sessions

and my thoughts about the project. I used student writing and my notes from the following semester to compare with the findings.

## Background

The model for the project was derived from the work of Ellen Goldsmith and her colleagues at New York City Technical College (Handel & Goldsmith, 1988; Handel & Goldsmith, 1990). Originally designed for developmental reading students to read aloud at home to their children, Goldsmith and Handel's model matched each of several genres of children's books (such as folktales) to a reading strategy (such as predicting what will happen next in the story).

The project described here enabled early childhood majors and second language speaking family members -- who were also students at the community college -- to practice English and enjoy books with one another. In addition, I believed children's books could elicit exchanges from different cultural perspectives, making children's books a particularly suitable means for early childhood students to learn more about working with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Although the children were an integral part of the project, the data collected and analyzed here does not address their participation in it. Instead, the focus is on the early childhood majors work with adult family members.

The impetus for this project came from my concern that early childhood majors have little opportunity to work directly with adults, but are expected to forge relationships with families once they are employed at child care programs and in schools. Partnerships between families and schools improve student achievement, attendance, self-esteem and behavior in addition to ameliorating the quality of school life for teachers, children and family members (Swap, 1993). For these and other reasons, most parents want to be involved with their children's education, but the mechanisms often are not in place to make all families' involvement possible (Chavkin, 1993).

This is especially true for families who speak languages other than English (Manning, 1995). Different experiences with schooling lead to differing expectations of school, and families from a variety of linguistic backgrounds may hold beliefs about children or about schooling that conflict with the norms at their children's school (Sosa, 1996; Valdez, 1996). As a result, school personnel and families may hold misconceptions about one another (Navrette, 1996) that interfere with their work together on behalf of their children.

Teachers with cross-cultural skills can make partnerships with second language speaking families work (Simich-Dudgeon, 1993). Prospective teachers are central to improving these partnerships (Bermudez, 1993; Epstein, 1992; Midkiff & Lawler-Prince, 1992). Unfortunately, however, teacher preparation programs often are not successful in preparing students to work with families (Brown & Brown, 1992; Foster & Loven, 1992). Coursework about working with families may make assumptions of parental inadequacy (Kerka, 1991) instead of teaching students how to support families' strengths. Family literacy and parent education programs about which students learn may be highly structured and not tailored to individual families; they may make assumptions of families' illiteracy rather than build upon their existing literacy (Strickland, 1996).

Some argue that education students need clinical experiences that prepare them to work responsively with families (Bermudez & Padron, 1987; Greenwood & Hickmann, 1991; Patton, Silva, & Myers, 1999), a component that is missing from most field experiences in teacher education programs. The experience studied here emphasized the prospective teachers' cross-cultural skills in the service of family literacy. The skills addressed here include supporting families' strengths and eschewing notions of parental inadequacy.

## Method

The project and the study based on it were conducted at a large, urban community college. The college has no entry requirements other than a high school diploma or GED, but upon admission each student is tested in arithmetic, algebra, reading, and writing. The writing assessment test (WAT) allots 50 minutes for students to write a persuasive essay that is rated by at least two professors. On the basis of this exam students are exempted from basic skills courses in writing or are placed in a developmental or "remedial" English course. Students who have not passed the WAT are permitted to take only beginning level academic courses. All of the early childhood majors who participated in this project, for example, were exempt from basic skills requirements in both Reading and English, although they had taken courses in those areas when they first came to the college.

Students who speak English as their second language and have not passed the WAT are placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, where writing is taught by instructors with backgrounds in TESOL. These instructors helped recruit students to meet in small, weekly groups with the early childhood majors.

The college's emphasis on learning English was echoed by the students in this project. The students who speak English as a second language repeatedly told the early childhood majors how much they wanted to improve their English pronunciation and writing and the early childhood majors aimed to help them.

Two of the six early childhood majors, Patricia and Jasmine, were native English speakers who were bilingual in Spanish. Patricia worked with only one student. This student's first language was Spanish, but Patricia's conversations with her were in English. The student in Jasmine's group who came most often was from India.

A third early childhood major, Carmen, was concerned at the start of the project that when she entered the college three years earlier she had spoken little English herself. With encouragement from the rest of us, she remained in the project. At the end of the semester she wrote about herself and other early childhood majors who spoke English as their second language:

> ...we should continue improving our language skill and never underestimate our potential to do something just because [of] our accent or pronunciation. I think the ECE bilingual students should be [group] leaders because that gives the student[s] some kind of confidence and security because they notice that you also have to go through the same situation that they are going through.

Most of the students in Carmen's group were Spanish speakers, as was she. One student, though, was from Haiti, and Carmen conducted the group in English.

Ruth is an African American woman, who was 21 at the time of the project and worried that her youth would interfere with her ability to conduct a group. She did not speak a language other than English and the students in her group were from Haiti and Hong Kong.

Tyrone was an African American man who was struggling with his required Spanish class. The students in his group were from a variety of countries. Stephen was a European-American man who also had great difficulty with his language course. The students in his group were from different places, but the one who came most often was from Italy.

I am a first generation European-American woman. My parents spoke both German and English at home, and I have personal as well as professional and academic interest in supporting families' home languages as they acquire English.

The students with whom the early childhood students worked were from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, China, Hong Kong, India, Italy, Egypt, and the former Soviet Union. All of them were enrolled in one of four levels of ESL classes.

The groups met for one hour a week and followed the New York City Technical College format for intergenerational literacy group sessions. First the group chatted about reading aloud the book they borrowed the week before. Then the early childhood major introduced a new book and reading strategy and read part of the book aloud, using the strategy, for example ask~ing questions about the book as she or he read. Next the group members were to form pairs and read the book aloud to each other, practicing reading aloud and using the reading strategy. After that, the group discussed the book and everyone shared thoughts about reading it aloud at home. Finally, the group members signed out the books they borrowed. Besides following this format, at least loosely, we used books that were recommended by Ellen Goldsmith.

A variety of data contributes to the findings, discussion, and interpretations that follow. As the early childhood majors arrived for each weekly group meeting with me and each other, they wrote approximately one page, responding to a question or questions I posed to them. The questions were based on their written and spoken comments the week before and on any private discussions they and I had during the week. Their writing complements my fieldnotes and provides their reflections in their exact words.

At the end of the semester I created an interview schedule and asked the early childhood majors to interview one another and record what their partners said. These interview sheets provide a second data source.

At each of our weekly meetings I took notes that I later transcribed with my own reflections, differentiating between the two. Tyrone was very interested in my notes and read them

periodically. He did not suggest any changes to them. Once when I was unable to attend our weekly meeting, Stephen conducted it while Ruth took notes. I incorporated her notes into my fieldnotes.

Every time the early childhood majors met with their groups and introduced a new book, they distributed booklets in which their group members recorded comments about reading aloud to a child. This student writing has been useful to triangulate with the early childhood majors' written and oral reflections on the group members' responses to the project.

The following semester another group of early childhood majors -- Jasmine and five new students -- met weekly with me and conducted groups with students who speak English as their second language. Again, they wrote weekly about their experiences, but since I ceased to keep extensive fieldnotes, I used data from that semester only to corroborate or contradict the findings from the Fall 1993 data.

Analysis was done by sorting the data into categories established by the literature and by the purposes of the project. Within those categories, themes emerged that were grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I began the data analysis, and Ruth and I analyzed the data further. As she and I discussed our interpretations, she added to the data by looking at the project from the vantage point of several years as a teacher in Head Start. She allowed me to record her perspectives, making the processes of data gathering and analysis recursive.

## Promoting Literacy for Oneself and Others

In their writing and in discussions in our group of seven, the early childhood students described their literacy related work. They analyzed their roles as group leaders promoting adult literacy and talked about their own acquisition of new understandings about reading and writing as well.

As I modeled the New York City Technical College format for the sessions each week, we discussed the book, the strategies, and how the early childhood majors thought they would work with the students in their groups. They also raised questions with me and each other that were based on their previous week's experience and that were important to them as group leaders. My notes, for example, describe a problem Ruth encountered. Ruth told us that:

> Two of Ruth's students came on time and the rest came 35 minutes late. Ruth felt sorry for the first two, who became quiet when the other three came and Ruth repeated the first part of the session. She said she wouldn't repeat next time. It was "too hectic" for the first two students.

When I asked how others would handle such a situation, Tyrone said he would ignore the latecomers and Patricia suggested a way to accommodate them without losing the rest of the group. This is one example of how we examined situations that arise when working with adults. We argued for and against many approaches to them, but did not decide on a single solution.

As group leaders, the students adopted professional behaviors that they learned about in their college early childhood classes. Mid-semester, the rest of us noticed that Carmen referred to notes she took during her sessions, as I did in ours and as the early childhood majors had done during their fieldwork with young children. Stephen and Jasmine decided to keep notes, too, to reflect more closely on what they and the group members were saying and doing.

Each week, with or without the help of their notes, the early childhood majors enthusiastically recounted what happened in their groups. Usually these accounts included descriptions of exchanges about literacy. For instance, according to my fieldnotes, Carmen told us how she introduced the folktale, *Anansi*, and the strategy of prediction to her group of students.

> Carmen said they started talking about predictions, but didn't want to do it in pairs. Carmen read aloud and explained the strategy. They gave different endings. But they didn't end up reading to each other, and Carmen wonders if they're comfortable reading.

As in Carmen's case here, the early childhood majors usually went beyond describing the literacy activity to search for the meaning behind it.

We spent time in our weekly meetings considering our own and the second language speaking group members' attitudes toward reading and writing. For example, when I introduced the reading strategy of linking new information to old, the early childhood majors discussed their own reading habits and strategies, referring to reading they did for their liberal arts courses such as psychology. Jasmine's writing indicates how early childhood majors observed their group members in relation to literacy:

> *The Snowman* was a little hard at first. She was expecting words, not a whole lot of pictures. She didn't like the idea of making up her own story line. As we went along she got the hang of it.... The strategy was good and it helped her in forming sentences.

Jasmine reported and evaluated what happened. She and others often spoke about their experiences as if they were weighing how the project should remain the same or be changed in the future.

In addition to analyzing the way their group members reacted to the literacy-related activities, the early childhood majors reflected on their own reactions. When I "read" *The Snowman*, which is a wordless book, aloud to our group, I asked everyone to interpret a page of pictures and Ruth refused. After using the book with her group she wrote:

> Well, when I used *The Snowman* I was scared, but I had to encourage the other students to read. I read the first two pages and each student read a page. ....It was hard for them to say what certain objects were, like for example, the flashlight, skateboard, punching bag and

> coal.... The French students were telling the Asian student what they call objects in their language. It was more a sharing process with words (which words would work). Another thing we shared was getting to like the book because it still has to grow on me. With no words in the book made more words for discussion.

Although Ruth now says, "I think I'd like to get that book for my classroom for children who don't talk much," six years ago the book and her position as group leader required her, an early childhood major who did not talk much, to extend herself.

The early childhood majors said the idea of reading strategies was new to them. When Carmen interviewed Tyrone at the end of the semester, he told her that he had learned "specific strategies that I didn't know" and that "prediction was the major one, because I didn't know how to teach it."

In their position of peer leader, the early childhood majors vacillated between regarding themselves as teachers and as fellow students. On the one hand, they observed and analyzed their group members' progress. On the other, they were co-learners, who pushed themselves at the same time as they pressed their group members to try new literacy-related activities.

Supporting Families' Strengths

Most of the early childhood students began the project with preconceptions of adult second language learners that worried them. According to my fieldnotes, at one of our first meetings,

> Tyrone raised questions about people who speak no or little English. How will he communicate with them? He'd switch them to a group with a bilingual leader. Several people were surprised to hear not all English as a Second Language students speak Spanish. What if there is no common language? What if someone refuses to read? Tyrone would take someone aside and find out why. Everyone agreed about not embarrassing anyone.

Tyrone's questions persisted until he began his group, although a visit to our group from an early childhood professor who specialized in bilingual education helped the seven of us begin thinking about the many ways in which people communicate with each other.

At the end of the project, Tyrone no longer felt as he did at the start. Having met regularly with fellow students who spoke other languages he "learned that regardless of any language barrier that may exist between two people ...they will find some way to communicate."

Tyrone traced a dramatic change in his attitudes. My notes from October 27 show Ruth's ambivalent attitude toward a mother in her group whose behavior Ruth found frustrating:

> Ruth said, "One girl didn't like the book." She has a two-year-old, and had a "different problem with every suggestion" Ruth made. She asked how she could explain about the six sons [in *Anansi*]. Ruth thinks she doesn't understand English as well as she speaks it. She kept interrupting. She's the only one in the group with a child; the rest are finding children to read to. Ruth wonders if it's just that [this student] knows about problems the rest can't anticipate.

Ruth was annoyed by the student, who was threatening what seemed to Ruth to be a tenuous leadership position. Still, Ruth was able to see beyond her annoyance and recognize the student's ability to anticipate what a two-year-old might do.

The group members reflected the confidence the early childhood majors had in them. Their writing confirmed that the experience with the early childhood majors placed them in rewarding situations with children. The student with whom Patricia met wrote about reading to a child, "I feel satisfied because she liked the book and she wanted me to read over and over again."

After reading *The Snowman* aloud to her daughter, one of Ruth's students wrote:

> I was very happy to see that she understood the story after the reading, because I thought it would be very difficult for me to explain the pictures in English.

Sometimes, though, the second language speakers confided that reading the books complicated their relationships with their children. Patricia wrote that the son of the student with whom she met:

> ...took this opportunity to tell his mom that she does not spend a lot of time with him. He also told her that the mother in the story was a better mom than she because the mom in the story seemed to spend more time with her daughter. As you can see [the group member's son] was always linking the stories to his life and his mom. I also remembered that [the group member] was afraid to read this story to him because she knew he was going to bring it up. She felt bad for not spending enough time with him.

Patricia told us she listened to her student without telling her what to do and that her student told her a lot about her life.

Thus the early childhood majors interactions with their group members were in synchrony with the way their professors might want them to relate to families. They sought families' strengths, supported situations that enhanced parent-child relationships, and listened non-judgmentally as family members discussed those relationships.

## Discussion

Before the project started Jasmine wrote:

> What interests me is teaching other parents to help their children. I never had that as a child. I want parents to get a better interest in reading. It's important for children to learn to experience different books early.

Jasmine began the project thinking about both literacy and work with parents. Once the project was underway, though, most of the early childhood majors seemed to focus more on the immediacy of the literacy activities than on their work with families in the future.

The experience the students had with this project differed from the work they would do as early childhood educators. The group meetings the early childhood majors led were comparable to sessions they could, but would not necessarily, have with the parents of children at their programs. Most important, as Tyrone pointed out, when early childhood teachers work with parents, both parties know the child well. In this project the early childhood majors rarely even met the children to whom their group members read aloud.

Through this project, though, the early childhood majors did explore some of the elements that contribute to positive relationships with families. Their dual role as group leader and fellow student caused several of the early childhood majors to question their role as the expert who dispenses information about children (Dimijian, ). On October 20, students talked about how much advice to give parents, as I recorded in my fieldnotes:

> There was some discussion about giving advice (about reading to your child, for example). Patricia said, "personal problems come out." Stephen likes the idea of giving advice or help. He said he wants to "open up to the group" and "help the impatient student relate." Tyrone said he avoids giving advice, because he doesn't want to be responsible for what someone else does if they follow his counsel.

One of the questions students asked each other in interviews at the end of the semester was: What do you think you taught your group members about being a parent (if anything)? Tyrone told Carmen:

> I don't think I taught them anything about being a parent. I think I may have reinforced the importance of spending time and energy with their children.

Whether early childhood educators have answers to share with parents or are partners with families in search of solutions was not resolved in our group. The weekly meeting was a forum for questioning teacher expertise, although some students, such as Stephen, continued to believe in it.

As the project went underway, some of the early childhood majors expressed fears about working with adults in groups and about the expectations the students in their groups might have of them. Their concerns were comparable to those held by early childhood educators who are not prepared to work with children's families. By the end of the semester, Ruth, among others, indicated that she regarded the students who speak English as their second language as her peers. She wrote:

> ...they've taught me it doesn't matter what age you are, you still can help a person. My reason for saying this is because I felt **small** because I was younger and thought they would intimidate me, but I was wrong (emphasis in original).

The questions of teacher expertise and teacher confidence working with adults were applicable to the early childhood majors' future work with all parents.

Other issues arose that were more specifically relevant for the early childhood majors' work with families for whom English is a second language. Despite several early childhood majors' concerns at the start of the project, different language speakers came to know each other over children's books. The books they read together elicited shared information about their respective cultures. More important, books raised issues that enabled the early childhood majors and their group members to explore similarities across cultures and individual differences among students.

For example, when students used *The Snowman*, a number of groups talked about snow. The early childhood majors reported how interesting it was to learn about some students' first encounters with snow in the United States and to hear how much snow fell in other students' countries of origin. While everyone enjoyed these exchanges, other books elicited much more meaningful ones. Stephen's and Carmen's groups, for example, exchanged ideas related to stereotyping when they read *Who is the Beast?* These discussions and others about diverse family structures that followed *Tell Me a Story, Mama* and about moral judgments when we read *The Little Red Hen* increased understanding among all the students in the project.

On several occasions early childhood students expressed empathy for situations their group members faced. Ruth compared her own discomfort when group members asked her about her personal life to the discomfort they must feel when she asks them to communicate in English. She tried, she said, "to make each individual feel comfortable with one another. ...I smile and make sure I fit everyone in the discussion."

The early childhood majors and the students who spoke English as a Second Language developed relationships and exchanged ideas with people they otherwise might not have met. The early childhood majors demonstrated that they saw similarities between themselves and students they originally thought were quite different from them. By their own account, what they learned most from the experience was how capable they are to work with others.

## Implications

At the end of the project, Ruth described her role with the adults in her group.

> ...I felt part of the time that I was not just the leader, but more of a puzzle piece making it complete. Well, the reason I was successful in the leadership role is because the students made me feel comfortable and our group of seven has a lot to do with it. I really enjoyed our

> group. I've learned so many things that I'll **never** forget. It brought me closer to books (emphasis in original).

Her words suggest that early childhood students may benefit from an experience that pushes them to examine the tension between peer and leader that is present in relationships between early childhood educators and family members. Ruth's reference to "our group of seven" indicates the value of time for group reflection on one's experience with adults.

When Ruth and I talked recently, she had many memories of the project and of her group in particular. She could not find traces of those experiences, though, in her current work with children and families in Head Start. She could not say the project had no effect, but she could not say what effect it had. As we analyzed data and reminisced about the project she said:

> This could be used for the parents at [the Head Start program where I work]. Because we do a lending library now and it's individualized, because the child picks a book and they take it home and the parent reads it to them. But if it's in a group, parents from the same class get together, you know, and a leader like one of us would discuss the book with them and ask them, "When you look at this book what do you think of?" and get feedback when they read it to a child, how it affected them, did they enjoy it, did they make statements, comments, or how do they feel reading it to their child? And, you know, that would actually help me in communicating with parents.

Had we not talked about the project six years later, Ruth might not have thought of this application to her current work.

Although it is hard to judge this project's influence on these six students' future work, this study demonstrates how a diverse group of early childhood professionals brought flexibility and mutual exchange to a family literacy program. Their willingness to understand others, with ongoing

support from me and each other, indicates possibilities for work with families that does not make assumptions of parental inadequacy.

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